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AUTHOR Lashway, Larry
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ABSTRACT

Until very recently, ethical issues were given little attention in administrator-preparation programs. This digest outlines the ethical responsibilities of school leaders and the dilemmas that they face. It offers the following suggestions for resolving ethical dilemmas: (1) Leaders should have and be willing to act on a definite sense of ethical standards; (2) leaders should examine dilemmas from different perspectives; (3) leaders can reframe ethical issues; and (4) leaders should have the habit of conscious reflection. Educators can create ethical institutions by developing an ethics committee or a shared school covenant. The virtues that leaders must practice include honesty, courage, and stewardship. The leader's responsibility is complex and multi-dimensional, rooted less in technical expertise than in simple human integrity. (Contains 10 references.) (LMI)

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Ethical Leadership

By Larry Lashway

"Real leaders concentrate on doing the right thing, not on doing things right." That advice from organizational consultants comes as no surprise to school leaders, whose lives are filled with difficult ethical dilemmas.

Principals experience such dilemmas on a daily basis, says William Greenfield (1991). Having moral obligations to society, to the profession, to the school board, and to students, they find that "it often is not clear what is right or wrong, or what one ought to do, or which perspective is right in moral terms."

Unfortunately, relatively few administrators have been trained to deal with these conflicts. Until very recently, ethical issues were given little attention in preparation programs (Lynn Beck and Joseph Murphy 1994).

What Ethical Responsibilities Do School Leaders Have?

Greenfield notes that school leaders face a unique set of ethical demands. Schools are moral institutions, designed to promote social norms, and principals are moral agents who must often make decisions that favor one moral value over another. Moreover, although schools are dedicated to the well-being of children, students have virtually no voice in what happens there. For all these reasons, the leader's conduct "must be deliberately moral."

Leader's moral duty expresses itself not only in the obvious day-to-day ethical dilemmas, but in the mundane policies and structures that may have hidden ethical implications. Robert Starratt (1991) notes that every social arrangement benefits some people at the expense of others; simply to assume that schools embody desirable standards is "ethically naive, if not culpable." Thus, the principal must not only behave responsibly as an individual, but must create an ethical institution.

As leaders, principals have a special responsibility to exercise authority in an ethical way. Greenfield points out that much of a principal's authority is moral; that is, teachers must be convinced that the principal's point of view reflects values they support. Coercion through bureaucratic authority will seldom have a positive, lasting effect.

What Ethical Dilemmas Do Principals Face?

As defined by Rushworth Kidder (1995), an *ethical dilemma* is not a choice between right and wrong, but a choice between two rights. For example, considering a bribe would be a "moral temptation"; deciding whether scarce resources should go to a gifted curriculum or a dropout-prevention program would constitute a dilemma.

Dilemmas arise when cherished values conflict. A principal who values both teacher autonomy and student achievement will face a dilemma when teachers want to enact a policy that lowers expectations.

This kind of conflict is heightened because school leaders are public officials with obligations to many people who often have competing values or interests. Should parents be informed if a counselor learns that their daughter is considering an abortion? Should a student group be able to book an assembly speaker whose views will offend some in the community? Should the principal support a teacher who has made a questionable grading decision?

Some studies suggest that obligations to superiors put special pressure on ethical decision-making. For instance, Peggy Kirby and colleagues (1990) asked principals to estimate how "a typical colleague" would respond to hypothetical dilemmas. Respondents usually indicated that colleagues would take "the path of least resistance" by deferring to superiors or taking refuge in official policies. Kirby and her colleagues speculate that these hypothetical colleagues actually reflect the norm.

How Can Leaders Resolve Ethical Dilemmas?

Moral philosophers generally agree there is no ethical "cookbook" that provides easy answers to complex dilemmas. But a number of thinkers have suggested some guidelines.

First, leaders should have—and be willing to act on—a definite sense of ethical standards. Starratt argues that a fully informed ethical consciousness will contain themes of caring (What do our relationships demand of us?); justice (How can we govern ourselves fairly?); and critique (Where do we fall short of

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our own ideals?).

Second, leaders can examine dilemmas from different perspectives. Kidder describes three. One is to anticipate the consequences of each choice and attempt to identify who will be affected, and in what ways. Another approach uses moral rules, assuming that the world would be a better place if people always followed certain widely accepted standards (such as telling the truth). A third perspective emphasizes caring, which is similar to the Golden Rule: How would we like to be treated under similar circumstances?

Third, leaders can often reframe ethical issues. Kidder claims that many apparent dilemmas are actually "trilemmas," offering a third path that avoids the either-or thinking. For example, faced with a parent who objects to a particular homework assignment on religious grounds, a principal may be able to negotiate an alternative assignment, thereby preserving academic integrity without trampling on parental rights.

Finally, leaders should have the habit of conscious reflection, wherever it may lead them.

How Do Leaders Create Ethical Institutions?

By their nature, most schools do not encourage discussion of ethical issues; educators spend most of the day isolated from one another, and time is always at a premium. One means of raising ethical awareness is to form an ethics committee similar to those found in many hospitals. Such committees would not make formal rulings, but would raise awareness of ethical issues, formulate ethical codes, and advise educators grappling with ethical dilemmas (Betty Sichel 1993).

Thomas Sergiovanni (1992) says that truly effective schools are those with a shared covenant clearly articulating the school's core values and providing a standard by which actions will be judged. Leaders must not only take the lead in formulating the covenant but actively support and enforce it. When a vital standard is ignored, principals should "lead by outrage."

What Virtues Must Leaders Practice?

Students of ethics are unanimous on one point: moral leadership begins with moral leaders. Howard Gardner (1995) says of great leaders that they embody the message they advocate; they teach, not just through words, but through actions.

What virtues are most important for school leaders? Some studies suggest that honesty is the quality most appreciated by subordinates (Michael Richardson and others 1992). And any principal who has launched a risky new program or has publicly shouldered the blame for someone else's mistake can testify to the importance of courage.

Some who write about ethics argue that leaders must use their power with restraint, since it always holds the potential for treating others as less than fully human. Peter Block (1993) advocates stewardship, which is the willingness to accept accountability for results without always trying to impose control over others. In simplest terms, stewardship asks leaders to acknowledge their own human faults and limitations rather than hiding behind their status and power.

Whatever virtue is desired, moral philosophers going back to Aristotle have emphasized that it must become a habit. Just as musicians develop musical ability by playing an instrument, people become virtuous by practicing virtue. Ethical behavior is not something that can be held in reserve for momentous issues; it must be a constant companion.

To be an ethical school leader, then, is not a matter of following a few simple rules. The leader's responsibility is complex and multidimensional, rooted less in technical expertise than in simple human integrity.

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